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Review: John Troyer's *Technologies of the Human Corpse*

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Technologies of the Human Corpse
John Troyer
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In some ways, we moderns are as much in the dark as were the ancients when we contemplate death. Currently holding sway in the West is the "metabolic definition," as laid out by Schrödinger in 1944, which suggests that life is characterized by the ability to maintain a metabolic process—a set of chemical reactions that convert energy and matter in such a manner that they maintain the structural functions of the organism (Schrödinger 1992). Such an argument, clearly, falls prey to the teleological argument against functionalism; a human's function cannot be used to explain its state as 'living' or 'dead', since the function of something is only meaningful in the context of an observer, as Paley suggests (1849).

Humans do not serve a function unto themselves; their *bodies* can be said to serve a function to them as humans, or they *as humans* can be said to serve a function to some larger structure. Thus, arguments as to the function that a human might serve within the polis—as citizen, or as human in relation to others via language—are probably closer to what we generally mean by "living" and "being alive" than chemical and biological explanations. This insight is clearly described by Giorgio Agamben in his discussions of 'bare life'; that individual who cannot communicate, and who does not respond to stimuli, is reduced to "bare life," being relegated to the realm of the merely biological, and hence with only limited protections available from the polis in which it has ceased to function (Agamben 1998). As such, a human in a "vegetative state" retains the functional ability to retain homeostases such as the maintenance of body temperature, blood pressure, and oxygen saturation of the bloodstream; but they have only the "bare life" Agamben describes, and hence in society are treated as an object rather than as a person, with only limited rights.

Such a person exists in a liminal realm; and once the aforementioned ability to maintain homeostatic functioning ceases, that individual loses yet more legal protection, becoming a corpse. The corpse is, as Bataille argues, the ultimate form of the *homo sacer*, which can be and often is mutilated and disposed of without legal recourse (Bataille 1991). Legally, the human corpse retains some rights (to not be disinterred without due process, to be protected from grave robbery, for example) until such time as the corpse has decomposed until only skeletal remains and unrecognizable organic materials remain (Gilligan and Stueve 2003). Additional protection for skeletal remains exist for some groups under US law, for example, under NAGPRA (Rose, Green and Green 1996) for those of Native ancestry.

At the same time, the corpse inspires feelings of the uncanny, as Freud suggested in 1919 (Freud 2003). The familiar—someone whom we have loved and within whom we had frequent interactions—suddenly becomes unfamiliar—inert, cold, unresponsive. The corpse is familiar to the observer as the most accurate possible representation of a once-known living being, but also is unfamiliar in its state of immobility and increasing decay. As

Heidegger suggests, that was which once familiar become strange and foreign, inspiring anxiety and confusion, dwelling in the realm between animate and inanimate (Withy 2015). In Western conceptualizations, the corpse has further become a site of contestation because of religious ideas that arose during the Exilic period. In late sources, such as Daniel and the Isaiah Apocalypse, perhaps a mélange of Canaanite and Parthian thought, the metaphoric notions of the restoration of the Judahite people became translated in some new instances into a literal idea of the resurrection of the body, particularly in intertestamental sources such as 2 Maccabees 12:38-45 (Allen and Jordaan 2018). These images of a bodily resurrection, which in the case of the martyrs in Second Maccabees can be understood as a presentation of patriotic images of those who fought the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV as national heroes who would metaphorically 'live forever' rather than as theological speculation concerning a general resurrection (van Henten 1997).

But later exegesis of Second Maccabees came to play a large role in the Messianic hope of groups such as the Qumran sectarians (as seen in manuscript 4Q 416) and later Christian groups, who cite Mark 12: 18-22, in which Jesus of Nazareth is said to criticize the Sadducees, who are said to argue there is no physical resurrection, and thus of not knowing the Hebrew scriptures—by which is meant the passages referred to in Daniel (Setzer 2005, 71).

While the largest denomination of Jews in the US, Reform, does not in general hold to the doctrine of a resurrection at all, some other Jewish denominations and all Christians denominations hold to the resurrection of the dead as a primary tenet, although this belief has declined markedly in the last 50 years in mainstream Protestant denominations (Stewart 2012). Nevertheless, inhumation is seen as following early Christian practice, as Ananias, Sapphira and Stephen were buried (Acts 5:6, 10; 8:1-2); and the Pauline remark that what is sown as perishable is raised incorruptible is seen as a Scriptural argument for inhumation (1 Corinthians 15:42; see Geisler and Potter 1998). As a result of these beliefs, inhumation became the standard practice among Christian communities, which came to dominate Western societies; in the post-World War II era, however, the percentage of populations in the West who say that they are Christian has been in significant decline (Peterson 2017).

Technologies of the Human Corpse

In the light of these developments, John Troyer has written *Technologies of the Human Corpse*, published in 2020 by the MIT Press. The book is an interesting amalgam of the author's memoir of his sister Julie's passing, the author's work at the Centre for Death and Society and the University of Bath, and recent historical developments in the handling of human corpses and our understanding of what is appropriate, what is not appropriate,

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is that a read will make it clear that one's own understanding of funerary traditions and the like are, by necessity, limited. For me, the world of the Jewish *chevra kadisha,* the washing of the corpse, its placing in a pine box after it is dressed in kittel and prayer shawl, and its speedy inhumation sand embalming are what is customary; tales of human plastination, photography of the deceased, and embalming to

enable lengthy showing of a cadaver strike me as morbid. Thus, the stories of the 'Bisga Man,' a corpse used to advertise an embalming product which was said to guarantee that a corpse would keep a lifelike appearance for months if not indefinitely strikes me as grotesque; the 'Bisga Man' toured as a promotion for the embalming fluid, seated in a causal pose, dressed in a natty suit, indicating to the viewers (one assumes those involved in the mortician's trade) that the fluid, which consisted of one and a half gallons of formaldehyde in fifteen gallons of distilled water, plus one gallon of 95 percent methyl alcohol, which was injected into the cadaver after all blood was drained through a needle inserted into the foramen magnum in the occipital bone, would produce a most lifelike result (Podgorny 2011). Modern embalming fluids contain more or less the same basic chemicals as Bisga fluid, with the addition of colorants and humectants; considering that creosote and related chemicals were used in embalming, Carl L. Barnes could indeed boast that his fluid and his method were a step toward a better-looking corpse.

The most interesting thing about 'Bisga Man,' as Troyer suggests, is that he stands (or sits) at the nexus of photography, emergent advertising techniques, and the attempts of humans to deal with grief by way of social structure. Troyer discusses the manner in which "spirit photography" developed, in which the living were presented in photographs in which ghostly images of the departed appeared, spectral images which only the camera could detect. (We would perhaps do well to avoid styling such photographs as an aberration of a less knowledgeable age, considering that the Internet is currently flooded with pictures of orb-shaped UFOs, visible likewise only to the camera).

Social Movements and the View from Nowhere

Of particular interest are the items that Troyer includes in his discussion of the "Happy Death" movement during the 1970s. This discussion was, to me, particularly instructive, since in the United States, the publication of Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* (1963) was particularly influential in its suggestion that ways of mourning in the United States had become a toxic but very lucrative chemical industry in which corporate producers shilled shoddy products to grief-stricken mourners, polluting the landscape with noxious chemicals (Hunt 2005) while removing death from the view of individuals, depriving these individuals of needful psychological processing, as Becker (1973) suggests. The "Happy Death" movement, which in 1986 resulted in the formation of Hospice, an organization whose efforts have resulted in the reduction of suffering for many, but in the U.S. may not have had the prominence of Mitford's publication.

What is of interest to me in reading *Technologies of the Human Corpse* is that it highlights my own situatedness, and in that sense embodiedness, in the understanding of the social matrix within which death resides. We don't think about death very much *per se*; death is an absence, a lack, about which thought is not really possible. Rather, we think about corpses, about rituals, about social processes regarding dying and the dead and how we regard those processes (the 'American Way of Death' is too expensive, the obligatory Christianity implied in most European burial rituals is onerous, ecoburials are laudatory, etc.) And our thoughts regarding those social rituals reflect not only our own preferred social structures (religions,

social strata, and the like) but our notions of what others should do—which is, in general, be more like us in our wishes for burials and funeral rituals.

In most writings about death, there is a faint sense of ridicule regarding past burial rites, and an implicit valorization of some eco-friendly or post-human future the author prefers. Perhaps—due to our situatedness, our embodiedness—this is inevitable. There is no 'view from nowhere' we can take regarding death; it has touched us all, and we have had to respond to it in accord with our own situatedness within a matrix of social structures.

Gazing into the Abyss

But that is, I suspect, one of the most interesting attributes of death. Like Heidegger suggested about Being itself, it cannot be considered directly. Death is an absence, a thing which is (we imagine) a nothing to the one who dies, and an absence to those who remain. There is indeed an abyss into which we might gaze, but there is nothing which might gaze back at us; there is no pondering death directly, except via the sideways glance of philosophy and religion. Derrida, in *The Gift of Death,* perhaps comes the closest in elucidating what he calls his 'obscure proverb': *tout autre est tout autre*. To say that every other individual is entirely other is, in some sense, commonplace. But Derrida links the proverb to the Akedah, the strange story in Genesis 22: 1-19 in which Abraham is told by the Deity to offer his son Isaac; when it is clear that Abraham is going to do so, a ram is provided by the Deity instead.

Historically, the story is seen as a redaction by the Elohist (with glosses by later contributors to the text of the Hebrew Bible) explaining why the custom of child sacrifice was replaced with animal sacrifice (Skinner 1910, 331-332). But the story itself holds a strange power and drama, leading to commentary in both the Mishna (Ta'an 2:4) and Talmud (Avot 5:3) as well as by numerous Christian authors, who saw the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son as a type of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

But for Derrida (Derrida 1995), the story of the Akedah has a more general potency. We might sacrifice ourselves for those we love; but the modern state not only asks individuals to sacrifice themselves (that is, to reduce themselves to *homo sacer*) for those they do not know, in urging individuals to be willing to 'die for their country.' But in Western nations, where, as Margaret Thatcher said of capitalism, 'there is no alternative', some are left to starve, dying while others are well-fed, we face serious questions. How can an individual live a moral life? How does one avoid complicity with the iron juggernaut of death and destruction that is modernity, and its capering madhouse brother, post-modernity?

Derrida calls to the Akedah in his reasoning-through of sacrifice. I can only marvel at the good fortune that found me born in a time and place when I did not go hungry, and when child sacrifice was not the norm; I was born to parents who were kind and generous, where many were not. To them I felt responsibilities, despite coming to realize there was much about them I could not understand about them; as Derrida says, "found everywhere there is something of the wholly other."

In death, Derrida argues, we face that which is entirely other, incomprehensible and incommunicative. But death also enables giving and taking (*donner-prendre*), true generosity and true indebtedness which live beyond the realm of the political or the social. It is in the care for the dead, the love of those who have died, the doing of good deeds on account of the dead, that humans can exceed the balanced book of exchange of capitalism and move into the economy of excess of actual love, the excess of doing good that can have no hope of being repaid (in Hebrew, a *chesed shel emet*, חסד של אמת; Kelman 2000). And, for Derrida, this is our only way of approaching the deity of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a God who looks at us but at whom we cannot, in turn, observe. But this God—whom Derrida calls by his Hebrew name—can also deal with *us* by excess, which Derrida calls grace. In this sense, Derrida suggests, it is by way of death and our responses to it that we can approach the divine (Angus 1998).

Conclusion

In conclusion, though, Troyer—probably by intention—leaves us with more questions than answers. It is clear that the deaths in his family were distressing to him, and the poems that he wrote are evocative. And the exhortations to the reader to attend to the matter of their own death and the disposition of their own remains is always timely; even if we ourselves have long since decided what we would wish to see happen with our corpses, it is always incumbent upon us to check to make sure that the legal documents which will govern such disposition reflect current realities. And the emphasis Troyer places upon certain events in the history of mourning practices highlights both his and the reader's preoccupations; is he correct in his insistence that the 'Happy Death' movement really transformed the ideas current in the public space, or was it in fact Jessica Mitford? Did, and do, the funerary practices of the British royal family, and particularly Queen Victoria, play an outsized role in shaping public ideas about what is a 'proper' funeral? In each family, is or was there some ceremony that happened at some critical point—after arriving in the U.S. by way of Ellis Island, or whatever—which set the tone of family ceremonies of mourning henceforth, and how might researchers seek to study such a phenomenon?

I ask these questions not as disparagement upon *Technologies of the Human Corpse,* which is probably the place for most instructors of a course like 'History of Death and Dying' to look for their introductory text on the modern age, and is certainly worth purchasing just for the information about Bisga Man. In addition, the author does us all a service by not shying away from his own emotions and responses to the deaths in his own family, and in particular by not being 'disembodied,' so to speak, as he writes this book. *Technologies of the Human Corpse* is an excellent introduction to those beginning their studies in thanatology; and a fine reminder to those who have been doing such work for a while that they come to the subject with a very personal, and truly embodied, set of concerns.

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